

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.



FSIS Facts



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

FSIS-1 Slightly revised July 1984

FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline— For Answers to Your Questions

MEAT AND POULTRY
HOT LINE

How long can fresh ground beef be safely stored in the refrigerator? What do you do if you find a piece of metal or an insect in a can of chicken soup?

You can get answers to these and other questions about the safety, wholesomeness, or labeling of a meat or poultry product by contacting the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Meat and Poultry Hotline. This central source of information is operated by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and can be reached by writing:

Meat and Poultry Hotline
USDA, FSIS
Washington, D.C. 20250

or by calling:

(202) 472-4485 (not a toll-free number)
TDD (202) 447-3333

Be sure to include your daytime phone number and return address with all letters of inquiry. This will enable FSIS to respond quickly and, in some cases, to talk to you directly by phone. Remember, the Meat and Poultry Hotline only handles calls about meat and poultry products. Agencies that handle fish and other nonmeat products are listed on page 2.

What FSIS Does

FSIS administers the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act, which assure that meat and poultry products sold in the United States and shipped abroad are safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled. FSIS inspects fresh meat and poultry as well as processed products like chicken soup, frozen meat pizzas, and pot pies.

USDA inspectors assure that meat and poultry products come from healthy animals that are free of harmful drug and chemical residues and are slaughtered and prepared under sanitary conditions. They also check to see that processed products meet prescribed standards and recipes, contain safe and approved ingredients, and are truthfully and accurately labeled. A system of food standards sets specific requirements for the composition of meat and poultry products -- such as the minimum amount of meat or poultry and the maximum amount of fat, moisture, curing agents, or other ingredients allowed.

Questions We Can Answer

FSIS can answer questions about general food safety issues as well as about a particular meat or poultry product. For example:

- What is the proper temperature for cooking meat and poultry?
- How long can these products be safely stored in the refrigerator or freezer?
- How can I keep meat and poultry products safe to eat when the electricity fails or the refrigerator or freezer quits?

- If I find a foreign object in a product, what can I do?
- What should be done when someone becomes ill from eating a product containing meat or poultry? (In the case of suspected food poisoning, contact your physician or local health authority immediately.)
- What information is required on a package label?
- Are products from swollen, leaking or dented cans safe to eat?
- What should I do if a product has an "off" odor or unusual appearance? Never taste a product if you suspect something is wrong. Return the product to the store and notify the manufacturer so the problem can be corrected. If you call or write FSIS about a product, it is our policy to notify the manufacturer and/or distributor about your complaint.

Contacting the Meat and Poultry Hotline



When you contact FSIS about a specific product, the following information will help us answer your question efficiently:

- Your name, address, and daytime telephone number;
- An explanation of your problem or complaint and what you have done to resolve it;
- The name and location of the store where you purchased the product, and the date you purchased it;
- The establishment code number from the product's container. (All inspected meat and poultry products have an official establishment number on the inspection legend that identifies the processing plant. On meat products it is preceded by the letters "EST" and on poultry products by the letter "P" -- illustrated at left. This number is also often embossed into the metal on cans, frozen food trays, or on the flap of bacon packages);
- The label from the product, if possible. If not, send the name of the product and any other information from the label.

FSIS can also answer general questions about its programs and policies. FSIS issues informational materials on food safety, such as "The Safe Food Book -- Your Kitchen Guide," as well as on the inspection and labeling of meat and poultry products, and food additives. For more information about FSIS programs, publications, and consumer education materials, write:

FSIS Public Awareness
 USDA, Rm. 1163-S
 Washington, D.C. 20250

Other Sources of Information

For information about other food issues, check your telephone directory for local agencies handling these issues:

- Safety, labeling, and ingredients of food products not containing meat or poultry: U.S. Food and Drug Administration;
- Pesticides: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency;
- Suspected false advertising: U.S. Federal Trade Commission;
- Sanitation of restaurants and food stores: City, county, or State health department;
- Food handling, nutrition, and storage questions: Cooperative Extension Service (listed in local phone books under county government or State university).